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ABSTRACT

Personnel from the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) studied 37 school shootings, involving 41 attackers who were current or recent students at the schools. Shootings clearly related to gang or involved with a relationship dispute that just happened to occur at school were not included. This report presents the preliminary findings from analysis of the behavior and thinking of these school shooters. It determined that most incidents of targeted violence are rarely impulsive. Attacks are typically the results of an understandable and discernable process of thinking and behavior. Prior to the incident, the attacker told someone about his idea, although there is not an accurate profile of the school shooter. Most attackers had access to guns. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity, and bullying played a key role in the attack. Most attackers engaged in some kind of behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help. The report suggests that a significant step in prevention is not only to identify students who are plotting an attack, but determine how best to respond to students who are already known to be in trouble. (JDM)

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ED 447 392

Safe School Initiative

An Interim Report on the Prevention of Targeted Violence in Schools

U. S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center
in collaboration with the
U. S. Department of Education
with support from the
National Institute of Justice

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Co-Directors: Bryan Vossekuil, Marisa Reddy PhD, & Robert Fein PhD
October 2000

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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION NEWS

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Statement by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley
on the U.S. Secret Service Interim Report on the
Prevention of Targeted Violence in Schools

I commend the U.S. Secret Service for their hard work and willingness to partner with the U.S. Department of Education to learn more about how to better prevent targeted violence in schools. What they have learned will help both the Department and schools and communities in our efforts to prevent these type of tragic events.

The findings make it clear that we must all pay attention and listen to young people. Contrary to assumptions that some of our youth "just snap" -- they don't. They exhibit obvious warning signs either through behavior or remarks, such as voicing problems or grievances; complaining about persecution or bullying; or showing signs of depression or desperation. The Secret Service found that when young people plan targeted violence, they often tell at least one person about their plans, give out specifics before the event takes place, and obtain the weapons they need – usually from their own family members. Young people who need help do not keep it a secret. But adults, who are in a position to help prevent such acts of violence, are often the last ones to know.

The report also makes clear that there is no "profile" of school shooters. They come in all ages, colors and from all family situations. The best way to prevent these kinds of behaviors is to ensure that young people have opportunities to talk and connect to caring adults, in smaller classes, in close-knit schools and in caring communities.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: The report will be posted this weekend on the Secret Service's web site: http://www.treas.gov/usss.

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY
UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20373-5802

DIRECTOR

October 13, 2000

The U.S. Secret Service has a long tradition of protecting our nation's leaders. We invest significant resources into our protective mission. A key component of protection involves threat assessment: efforts to identify, assess, and manage persons who might pose a threat of violence to our protectees.

In the last few years, the Secret Service has completed an operational study of the behavior and thinking of all persons in the U.S. in the past 50 years who attacked, or tried to attack, a major national leader or public figure. This study, the Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP), has led us to modify and improve our approach to threat assessment.

After the recent spate of school shootings in 1998 and 1999, I met with the Secretary of Education to see if the Secret Service could contribute to the prevention of these terrible attacks. We agreed that staff from the Secret Service's new National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) who had conducted the ECSP would conduct a similar operational study of school shootings. The goals of this project are to gather and analyze accurate and useful information about the behavior and thinking of young persons who commit acts of targeted violence in our nation's schools and to provide this information to school and law enforcement professionals with responsibilities to prevent targeted school violence.

Over the last fourteen months, National Threat Assessment staff have been studying information about school shooters. This work has involved systematic analysis of investigative, judicial, educational, and other files, and interviews with ten school shooters (so far). While NTAC's work is not completed, we think it is appropriate to release preliminary findings from our analysis of the behavior and thinking of more than 30 school shooters. Later, we will be developing additional work products, including a threat assessment guide for those with school violence preventive responsibilities, and a series of scientific publications.

My hope is that the knowledge and expertise utilized by the Secret Service to protect the President may aid our nation's school and law enforcement communities to safeguard our nation's children. We offer these preliminary findings in support of our belief that much targeted violence is potentially preventable, if thoughtful persons work together in a systematic and reasonable way.

We welcome your comments about these materials. Please feel free to address any correspondence to: Bryan Vossekuil, Executive Director, National Threat Assessment Center, Room 901, U.S. Secret Service, 950 H Street, Washington DC, 20223.

Sincerely,

Brian L. Stafford
Director

U.S.S.S. Safe School Initiative
An Interim Report on the Prevention of Targeted Violence in Schools

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BACKGROUND

Most official statistics show that rates of school violence have steadily decreased since 1993. As reports from the U.S. Department of Education and others have shown, school is one of the safest places for our nation's children. However, several high-profile shootings in schools over the past decade have resulted in increased fear among students, parents, and educators. The Secret Service Safe School Initiative focuses on a rare but significant component of the problem of school violence – incidents of targeted violence in school. "Targeted violence" is a term developed by the Secret Service to refer to any incident of violence where a known (or knowable) attacker selects a particular target prior to his or her violent attack. The target may be an identified (or identifiable) person, such as a particular classmate or teacher, or it could be a building, such as the school itself.

Other kinds of problems in American schools are far more common than the targeted attacks in schools that have occurred in Jefferson County, Colorado, Jonesboro, Arkansas, West Paducah, Kentucky, and other communities. Moreover, children and adolescents face many other problems in school and out. However, the tremendous impact of each one of these school shootings – on the school, the surrounding community, and the nation – and the increased fear these events have engendered have made it necessary for school officials, parents, and others to consider steps they can take to prevent incidents of targeted violence in their schools.

Why is the U.S. Secret Service involved in school safety?

Since 1901, the U.S. Secret Service has had responsibility for protecting certain national leaders, candidates and visiting heads of state. That mission has two components: The most visible is physical protection, including the use of magnetometers, armored vehicles and armed agents. The less visible component is known as protective intelligence or threat assessment – the process of identifying, assessing, and managing persons who may pose a risk to protectees before they approach or attack.

In the early 1990s, the USSS began a process to re-examine its procedures for assessing threats to protectees. To develop a more systematic way of thinking about threat assessment, Robert Fein and Bryan Vossekuil developed the Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP). The ECSP was an operational study that analyzed the thinking and behavior of all 83 persons known to have attacked, or approached for attack, a prominent person of public status in the United States in the last fifty years. This research helped to dispel many myths about assassination and led to a more thorough and focused process for assessing people and situations that have come to official attention due to some inappropriate communication or behavior of concern.

As findings from the ECSP emerged, it became increasingly clear that assassination is only one type of targeted violence. Other targeted violence includes some types of school violence and workplace violence - and many types of stalking. These types of targeted violence – which are also rare – nevertheless may have tremendous impact when they occur, just as they do in schools. As ECSP researchers shared their approach and findings with law enforcement and other professionals, it seemed clear that a similar approach might be used to better understand – and ultimately prevent – targeted violence in schools. In discussions between the Secret Service and the Secretary of Education, it was agreed to extend the methodology from the ECSP to learn more about the patterns of planning, thinking, and behavior that preceded school shootings.

The Safe School Initiative was developed and implemented as a partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, under the direction of the Secretary of Education, and in close collaboration with Bill Modzeleski, Director of the Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. In this collaboration, the U.S. Secret Service brought to the problem of school violence its experience in researching, understanding and preventing targeted violence. The goal of the Safe School Initiative is to provide accurate and useful information, to school administrators, educators, law enforcement professionals and others who have protective and safety responsibilities in schools, to help prevent incidents of targeted violence in school.

METHOD

- For this project, personnel from the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) studied 37 school shootings, involving 41 attackers who were current or recent students at the school, and where the attacker(s) chose the school for a particular purpose (and not simply as a site of opportunity). Shootings that were clearly related to gang or drug activity, or to an interpersonal or relationship dispute that just happened to occur at the school, were not included.

- For each incident, researchers reviewed primary source materials, such as investigative, school, court, and mental health records and answered several hundred questions about the case. Teams of investigators and social science researchers coded each of the cases, with at least two raters assigned to each case. Each rater independently answered questions about the incident in a codebook, then discussed his or her ratings with the other team member and produced a single "reconciled" scoring for the case. Information gathered about each case included facts about the attacker's development of an idea and plan to harm the target, selection of the target, motivation for the incident, communications about his ideas and intent, acquisition of weapons, as well as demographic and background information about each attacker.

- In addition to file reviews for each case, NTAC personnel have conducted supplemental interviews with 10 of the attackers. The purpose of the interviews is to get the attacker's perspective on his decision to engage in a school-based attack. The findings included herein are based primarily on the information obtained from review of available files in each case. The information gleaned from interviews is used in training venues to illustrate particular aspects of a case.

INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

- Contrary to common belief, incidents of targeted violence at school are not a new phenomenon. The earliest case examined occurred in 1974, where a student brought guns and homemade bombs to his school, set off the fire alarm, and shot at janitors and firemen who responded to the alarm.

- Since the first case in 1974, NTAC personnel identified 37 incidents, involving 41 attackers, that meet the study criteria specified above.

- These incidents took place in 26 states, with more than one incident occurring in Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee.

- All of the incidents were committed by boys or young men.

- Contrary to the impression given from the attack at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado, fellow students were not the only targets chosen by the attackers. In over half of the incidents, the attacker had selected at least one school administrator, faculty member, or staff member as a target.

- In more than 2/3 of the incidents, the attacker killed one or more students, faculty, or others at the school. Handguns and rifles/shotguns were the primary weapons used. More than half of the attacks occurred in the middle of the school day.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

1. **Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive. The attacks are typically the end result of an understandable and often discernible process of thinking and behavior.**

   - In almost all of the incidents, the attacker developed the idea to harm the target before the attack. Over half of the attackers developed their idea for the incident at least two weeks prior to the attack.

   - In well over 3/4 of the incidents, the attacker planned the attack. Although a few attackers developed a plan the same day that they launched an attack, more than half of the attackers developed a plan at least two days prior to the attack.

   - More than half of the attackers had revenge as a motive and over 2/3 had multiple reasons for their school-based attacks.

   - More than 3/4 of the attackers were known to hold a grievance at the time of the attack. Many attackers communicated with others about these grievances prior to the attack.

Implications

Students who engaged in targeted violence in school typically did not "just snap." Because information about these attackers' intent and planning was potentially knowable before the incident, some attacks may be preventable. However, because the time span between the attacker's decision to mount an attack and the actual incident may be short, quick efforts to inquire and intervene are necessary. An inquiry should include investigation of, and attention to, grievances and bad feelings about school or potential targets that a student may be experiencing.

2. Prior to most incidents, the attacker told someone about his idea or plan.

- In over 3/4 of the cases, the attacker told someone before the attack about his interest in mounting an attack at the school. In over half of the incidents, the attacker told more than one person about his ideas/plans. For example, in one case an attacker made comments to at least 24 friends and classmates about his interest in killing other kids, building bombs, or carrying out an attack at the school. Some peers knew detailed information about the attacker's plans, while others knew "something spectacular" was going to happen in school on a particular date.

- In virtually all of the cases in this study, the person told was a peer – a friend, schoolmate, or sibling. In only two cases did such a peer notify an adult of the idea or plan.

- In fewer than one quarter of all incidents the attacker communicated a threat to his target(s) prior to the attack.

Implications

In most cases, the attacker told a friend, schoolmate, or sibling about his ideas for a possible attack before it occurred. However, because most attackers did not threaten their target directly, it is important not to rely on the issuance of a direct threat to prompt concern or to initiate an inquiry about a student. It is helpful to distinguish between <u>making</u> a threat (telling people they intend to harm someone) and <u>posing</u> a threat (engaging in behaviors that indicate an intent, planning, or preparation for an attack); adults should attend to concerns that someone poses a threat.

Although many friends, classmates, and siblings knew about the attackers' ideas and plans before the attack, in almost no case did they bring that information to an adult's attention. As a result, it is important that threat assessment inquiries involve efforts to gather information from anyone who may have contact with the student in question – so that all relevant information may be discovered. It is also important both to decrease barriers in a school environment that may prevent students who have information of concern from coming forward and to have a thoughtful and effective system to handle and analyze information that comes to those in authority.

3. There is no accurate or useful profile of "the school shooter."

- Attacker ages ranged from 11 to 21.
- They came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. In nearly one quarter of the cases, the attackers were not white.
- They came from a range of family situations, from intact families with numerous ties to the community to foster homes with histories of neglect.
- Their academic performance ranged from excellent to failing. Some attackers were taking Advanced Placement courses at the time of the incident; others had histories of poor academic performance.
- They had a range of friendship patterns, from socially isolated to popular.
- Their behavioral histories varied, from having no observed behavioral problems to multiple behaviors warranting reprimand and/or discipline.
- Few attackers showed any marked change in academic performance, friendship status, interest in school, or disciplinary problems at school prior to their attack.
- Few of the attackers had been diagnosed with any mental disorder prior to the incident. Additionally, fewer than one third of attackers had histories of drug or alcohol abuse.

Implications

The use of profiles is not effective either for identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted violence at school or -- once a student has been identified -- for assessing the risk that a particular student may pose for school-based targeted violence. The personality and social characteristics of the shooters varied substantially. Knowing that an individual shares characteristics, features, or traits with prior school shooters does not advance the appraisal of risk. Moreover, the use of profiles carries a risk of over-identification - the great majority of students who fit any given profile will not actually pose a risk of targeted violence. Finally, use of profiles will fail to identify some students who in fact pose a risk of violence - but who share few if any characteristics with prior attackers.

An inquiry should focus instead on a student's behaviors and communications to determine if the student appears to be planning or preparing for an attack. A fact-based approach may be more productive in preventing school shootings than a trait-based approach. The ultimate question to answer in an inquiry is whether a student is on a path toward a violent attack, and if so to determine how fast they are moving and where intervention may be possible.

4. Most attackers had previously used guns and had access to them.

- Over half of attackers had a history of gun use, although most did not necessarily demonstrate a "fascination" with weapons or explosives.

- In nearly 2/3 of the incidents, the attackers got the gun(s) used in the attack from their own home or that of a relative. In some cases, the guns had been gifts to the attackers from their parents.

Implications

Access to weapons among students is common, but when the idea of an attack exists any efforts to acquire, prepare, or use a weapon may be a significant move in the attacker's progression from idea to action. An inquiry should include investigation of, and attention to, weapon access and use and to communication about weapons. The large proportion of attackers who acquired their guns from home points to the need to consider issues of safe gun storage.

5. Most shooting incidents were not resolved by law enforcement intervention.

- Over half of the attacks were resolved/ended before law enforcement responded to the scene. In these cases, the attacker was stopped by faculty or fellow students, decided to stop shooting on his own, or killed himself.

- In only three cases did law enforcement personnel discharge any weapons during the incident.

- In contrast with the incident at Columbine High School, which lasted over three hours, half of the incidents lasted 20 minutes or less.

Implications

Schools may make the best use of their resources by focusing on prevention, and not by relying exclusively on law enforcement to respond to and resolve school-based attacks.

6. In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.

- Although the attacker acted alone in at least 2/3 of the cases, in almost half the cases the attackers were influenced or encouraged by others. For example, in one case the attacker's idea had been to bring a gun to school to appear tough so that the students who had been harassing him would leave him alone. It was not until he shared this idea with two friends – and they convinced him he had to actually shoot kids at school to get the other students to leave him alone – that he decided to actually attack. Several days later he brought a shotgun to school, killing two and injuring two.

- In over 3/4 of the incidents, other kids knew about the attack before it occurred. Some knew exactly what the attacker planned to do; others knew something "big" or "bad" was going to happen, and often they knew the time and date it was to occur. In one case, an attacker had planned to shoot students in the lobby of his school prior to the beginning of classes. He told two friends exactly what he had planned and asked three others to meet him in the mezzanine overlooking the lobby that morning (ostensibly so that they would be out of harm's way). On most mornings, only six students could be found in the mezzanine before classes. The student who knew about the planned attack told so many others that by the time the attacker opened fire in his school lobby, over twenty-four students were in the mezzanine watching the attack. One who knew about the attack brought a camera so he could record the event – but he got so excited once the attack started that he forgot to take pictures.

Implications

That other kids often know about these incidents in advance contradicts the assumption that the shooters are "loners" and that they "just snap." An inquiry should include efforts to gather information from a student's friends and schoolmates. An inquiry should also include attention to the influence that a student's friends or peers may be having on intent, planning, and preparations.

7. In a number of cases, having been bullied played a key role in the attack.

- In over 2/3 of the cases, the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident.

- A number of attackers had experienced bullying and harassment that was longstanding and severe. In those cases, the experience of bullying appeared to play a major role in motivating the attack at school.

Implications

Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk for targeted violence in school. However in a number of cases, attackers described experiences of being bullied in terms that approached torment. They told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, would meet the legal definitions of harassment. That bullying played a major role in a number of these school shootings should strongly support ongoing efforts to combat bullying in American schools.

8. Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

- In almost every incident, the attacker engaged in behavior that caused others (e.g., school officials, police, fellow students) to be concerned about him. In over 3/4 of the incidents, an adult (school administrator, teacher, staff member, or law enforcement professional) had expressed concern about the attacker. In over half of the cases, the attacker had come to the attention of more than one person for some concerning behavior.

- Behaviors that led others to be concerned about the attacker prior to the attack included behaviors related to the attack, such as efforts to get a gun, as well as other disturbing behaviors not related to the subsequent attack. For example, in one case a student wrote several poems for his English class that revolved around themes of homicide and suicide as possible solutions to feelings of hopelessness and desperation. In another case a student worried his friends by talking often about plans to put rat poison in the cheese shakers at a popular pizza establishment.

- In well over 3/4 of incidents, the attackers had difficulty coping with a major change to a significant relationship or a loss of status (e.g., a personal failure), prior to their school attack.

- Prior to the incident, nearly 3/4 of the attackers either threatened to kill themselves, made suicidal gestures, or tried to kill themselves. More than half of the attackers had a history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.

Implications

A significant problem in preventing targeted violence in schools is determining how best to respond to students who are already known to be in trouble or needing assistance, not only to identify students who are plotting an attack. In cases where there is concern about potential targeted violence, an inquiry should include investigation of, and attention to, a student's difficulty coping with major losses or perceived failures, particularly where it may have led to feelings of desperation and hopelessness.

NEXT STEPS

As noted earlier, the Safe School Initiative is not yet completed. Over the next weeks and months a number of reports and other products will be developed and disseminated. These will include a threat assessment guide for school and law enforcement professionals with responsibilities for preventing targeted violence in schools; a series of scientific reports; and, other products for teachers, principals, and school boards.

U.S.S.S. Safe School Initiative
Project Directors

Bryan Vossekuil: Mr. Vossekuil, Co-Director of the USSS School Safety Initiative, is Executive Director of the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center. He previously served as Deputy Special Agent in Charge of the Secret Service Intelligence Division and on President Reagan's protective detail. He also served as Co-director of the Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project.

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